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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (HARRIS AND HOPKINS)

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [ECON](#) [EINV](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: RCD VP LAUDS PARTY INFLUENCE, BEMOANS OPPOSITION  
WEAKNESS

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (C) In a June 25 courtesy call with the Ambassador, ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party Vice President Hamed Karoui argued that the party was behind much of Tunisia's political, social and economic progress. The Ambassador noted that while social and economic achievements are noteworthy, Tunisia is clearly ready for more and better political freedom. Karoui deflected the suggestion, responding that Tunisia was pursuing political reform at an appropriate pace and blaming weak opposition parties for not being more active. Separately, Karoui noted that bilateral economic and commercial ties could be improved. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Perhaps indicative of his more than sixty years of party activism, Karoui stressed that "the party" and former President Bourguiba were responsible for all Tunisia has achieved in the post-independence period. Karoui said that Bourguiba had extensive contact with the Tunisian people and spread support for the independence movement and the party throughout the country. (NOTE: This is in stark contrast to current President Ben Ali, who rarely travels outside of the greater Tunis area. END NOTE.) Noting that he expected the Ambassador to raise the pace of Tunisia's political reform, Karoui argued that Tunisia cannot progress quickly. "We're making efforts," said Karoui, pointing out that democracy is harder in a country accustomed to colonialism (both French and Ottoman). Tunisia is lucky to be a homogeneous society, but "we must be prudent" on our path to greater democratization.

¶3. (C) When the Ambassador asked for more details about this "path," Karoui launched into a critique of Tunisia's eight opposition parties, dividing them into two categories. Those (mostly GOT loyal) parties represented in Parliament, said Karoui, should make better use of their opportunities to present alternative views and real constructive criticism of GOT plans, including budgets and programs. Karoui blasted "other parties" (NOTE: The PDP and FDTL. END NOTE.) who bear the standard of human rights and democracy, when "We gave them freedom and human rights!" Parties should represent the people, instead of proposing alliances between the left and Islamists that most Tunisians reject. Karoui noted that while GOT and RCD plans to address unemployment, education and other goals are clear, opposition parties do not present ideas that garner popular support. When the Ambassador stressed that some parties feel that they do not have the political space to discuss their plans or distribute their media, Karoui suggested that Tunisians should be thankful for the economic and social progress the RCD, and the GOT, has achieved.

¶4. (C) Karoui then turned to critique civil society, saying those who cooperate with Islamist groups today would be the first to lose if Islamists were to come to power in Tunisia. The GOT agrees with groups like the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD) that are promoting women's rights, but "We liberated women." Raising the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) quagmire, Karoui said the RCD supports the LTDH's mandate, but excluding RCD members from the organization is "unacceptable." He summarized his criticism of independent political and civil society groups by noting, "Everyone has the right to say what they want, and even go to foreign embassies for support, but they would be better off seeking support from inside the country."

¶5. (SBU) In what has become a recurring theme among GOT officials, Karoui opened and closed the hour-long conversation by saying he thought that the economic and commercial relationship "could be better," particularly US investment in Tunisia. To support this, Tunisia is changing its laws to improve the investment climate. The Ambassador stressed that he is focusing on this issue and hopes to welcome a US business delegation in November. Karoui was supportive of the idea and said that he recognized the important role the private sector plays in these efforts. The Tunisian private sector must also learn to be more competitive, productive and efficient, said Karoui.

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COMMENT AND BIO NOTE  
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¶6. (C) Karoui, who will turn eighty this year, is a thoughtful and polished interlocutor and second only to President Ben Ali in the RCD party structure. A member of

the Social Destourian Party (PSD, the RCD predecessor) in the pre-independence period, Karoui argued that the party is the source of all that is good in Tunisia. Most of his statements began with "We," but the array of political, social and economic programs implemented suggested Karoui views the RCD, GOT and Presidents Bourguiba and Ben Ali as a united entity operating for the good of Tunisia.

¶7. (C) While Karoui is too quick to praise RCD accomplishments, his criticism of the opposition rings true. Few parties have popular support or are even known to the general populace. In a series of upcoming meetings with opposition party leaders, the Ambassador will encourage greater party activism and raise the possibility of USG sponsored party training programs. END COMMENT.  
GODEC